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ABSTRACT

Through a comparison of the historical perspectives of medieval and modern libraries, this paper is designed to clarify the purpose and goals of the library, and to promote a public and intellectual debate to guide future developments. The Middle Ages were chosen because libraries possessed an importance and centrality to learning, civilization, and intellectual debate that has not been duplicated since that time. The modern academic library was chosen as the basis of comparison because it corresponds the most closely with the medieval library in terms of overall intellectual trends. An examination of the institutional and social contexts of libraries in both time periods includes discussions of preservation, scholasticism, size and scope of collections, and the library's role. A discussion of the library service concept and its role in helping to decide some of the academic institution's goals concludes the paper. A 17-item bibliography is provided. (THC)

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Toward A Foundation of Library Philosophy: Comparing the Medieval and Modern Library.

by

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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A lack of library philosophy has hurt the profession of librarianship. "It requires little or no proof to state that the profession has never set forth a complete statement of its philosophy . . . . The sad truth of the matter is that the profession has not concerned itself with evolving or even thinking about a philosophy."[1] This deficiency still exists today, and it is still hindering librarianship from meeting challenges or even establishing the basic principles upon which library education should operate. Lack of a philosophy/philosophies poses an even more serious threat in the future. Although not specifically an attack on the library, all publicly funded institutions are coming under scrutiny, and they must not only justify expenditures, but their existence. Future technological changes will offer opportunities and decisions for the library. Without professional goals and purpose the danger is too evident from cutbacks, and change may sweep the profession into a sea of processes and situations not in line with the intended role of the library or its service to the public. The current situation is an opportunity to step back and define the purpose and goals of the library, and to stage a public and intellectual debate which would guide future developments and help establish the library in the public's mind.

One of the intellectual ways of approaching the question of the purpose and place of the library is to view it in historical perspective. What was the library and why did it exist? Asking and answering these questions would clarify, by comparison and contrast, the present role and function of the modern library. Without this questioning we are in professional danger of mastering the technical aspects of librarianship without knowing why or why we are not doing certain things. In an attempt to clarify and rectify the lack of library philosophy, it will be the attempt here to study this in historical perspective to bring out the changes and constants in the purpose of the library. The Middle Ages have been chosen because they were a time when libraries occupied an importance and centrality to learning, civilization, and intellectual debate that has never been duplicated. Beginning historical comparisons might prove the most fruitful dealing with this era. The modern academic library has been chosen as the model with which to compare the medieval counterpart. The reason for this is that in terms of overall intellectual

trends, the modern academic library corresponds most closely as will be demonstrated. From this must come substantive observations on the differences and similarities of library objectives. To dwell on the how-to issues will not, and has not yielded the kinds of answers needed today. Only in this way can the library community rationally face economic and technological challeges and the future. An examination of the historical era of the Middle Ages is now in order.

The medieval period is a difficult one to encapsulate. Traditional views of the era as one long "dark age" have given way to more realistic views of the immense contributions and progress of the time. What gives the time some continuity during those changes is the development and persistence of several important institutions: Manorialism, Feudalism, the Roman Catholic Church, and the remnants of the Roman Empire. Within these boundaries of tradition there is a tremendous change. One sees the slow progress and careful preservation of ancient classics building to the establishment of a Holy Roman Empire and the growth of cities and universities. Finally it must not be forgotten that the Middle Ages was the foundation of the developing humanism that would appear and fuel the Renaissance. The technical and intellectual strides of the times, approximately 500-1250, were no small feats. The boundaries of those established institutions invariably influenced the nature of the library. It is not the purpose here to question those limits, but rather to look at the context of libraries and then to discern the service and purpose of them. In sum, what was the situation and rationale which caused them to assume those roles?

> The ravages of conquest and the advent of a barbaric age placed all learning in real jeopardy. With increasing rapidity those concerned with the life of the mind were fleeing the strife torn cities and books and learning quickly passed into the church.[2]

The early Middle Ages was the period of reclamation and preservation of civilization following the fall of Rome. The agent of this preservation was to be the monastary. The Benedictines were to set the precedent for reading, and hence learning, in the monastaries.

> The Benedictine way came closer to scholarship when the lives of the monks were completely upset and reorganized. . . . (T)he Monte Cassino community was destroyed by the most recent Germanic arrivals, . . . and the brothers fled to Rome. Since their normal stint of manual labor, country-style, was not practicable there, much more time went henceforth into study. . . .[3]

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Other orders later to follow also emphasized this aspect in some way. Cassiodorus and St. Augustine founded such orders, and the Irish monastaries were among numerous examples which emphasized learning. "For all orders, the monastary was generally accepted as the center of learning."[4]

In order to facilitate this learning and reading the monastaries established libraries, and those libraries were to be the preserving agent of ancient classics through storage and copying. When the societal conditions, especially literacy, declined radically, the only place for books were the monastaries. Due to their religious origin, scriptures, epistles, and commentaries were collected, along with the Latin classics because of the general intellectual interest.[5] "The remarkable thing is not that so much of classical learning was lost, but that so much was preserved in the most trying of circumstances."[6]

One of the most important functions the medieval library performed then, was preservation. By storing and copying Church fathers and classics these writings were saved from extinction. Another aspectwas the subsequent service to learning and a learned clientele which grew out of the monastic tradition. "In the Middle Ages, of course, all monastic and religious libraries were expressly for the greater honour and glory of God."[7] Therefore scholarship was limited by the boundaries of orthodoxy, but it was still the role of the library to serve this:

> From the sixth to the tenth centuries . . . the monks held the Western world together . . . . Reasonably secure, they preserved the ancient culture in their libraries, copying old books, making new ones, conductiong almost the only schools. Monastary walls sheltered men with the impulse to escape the world, to seek virtue, to reflect on mans' soul and his destiny. . . . (They) were often . . . refuges in an evil wilderness.[8]

These same functions were to be later expanded in the university library of the Middle Ages. By this time there had developed enough of a buffer of prosperity, commerce, and general security to establish cities, and with them schools. Universities grew up when "(t)he new culture was cosmopolitan. It had its common language, the easy, unpretentious Latin of the time, and its common classics, pagan and Christian. The clergy were at home everywhere . . . , (and) the Crusades gave men a taste for travel and adventure. . . ."[9] Intellectually, a rediscovery of Aristotle, the revival of the classical <u>trivium</u> and <u>quadrivium</u> led to new interest in learning.

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Scholasticism was an outgrowth of the push for learning. Essentially it was the subjection of faith to the dictiates of reason.[10] This in turn was to lead to the role of the disputation at the university.

> This led to frequent controversies between exponents of conflicting attitudes, giving the schools in which they taught a wide notoriety. Dialectic . . . threatened to subordinate divine authority to rational analysis . . . . Debates about the respective roles of reason and authority in the discernment of truth, as about the question of universals, engaged the minds and energies of scholars everywhere,. . . (and) on more than one occasion led to accusations of heresy and demands for retraction.[11]

It was within this context that the university library of the time came to expand certain roles. Before the printing press preservation was still important, but other issues came to the fore. The increased scholarly interest greatly expanded the traditional role of the library serving intellectual pursuit. This however, led to a new responsibility because of the disputations. The library assumed some control over the kind of scholarship it would allow. To be sure, there was a bias in libraries through the time, but the interest in Aristotle, rationality, and dialectic made the intellectual weight of scholarship more important. In retrospect one can see that the original questioning of orthodoxy could eventually lead to a breakdown in religious unity. To the credit of the Church, there were those who saw the possible implications that scholarship was leading to. Within the essentially religious character of the university library collection[12] authorities saw the need to restrict access to some of the classics, and "(a)uthority did its best . . . to keep entirely beyond the pale . . . tracts on alchemy, magic and the occult . . . (which) contributed to the mastering of nature . . . ."[13] The thinking of orthodox Christianity was that the pagan content of ancient writing could, and did entice some into heresy and apostacy.[14] Therefore, when intellectualism became a threat to unity, then the answer was to banish the heretical/dangerous writings to the shelf.

Umberto Eco has brilliantly examined the ramifications of the inquiries of the time, and what this had to do with the library. Drawing upon his vast scholarship Eco wrote a fictionalized account of the struggle between humanism and orthodoxy in a medeval library. A character in the novel delivers his quite rational reason for censoring works in the library:

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> Every book by that man (Aristotle) has destroyed a part of the learning Christianity had accumulated over the centuries. The fathers had said everything that needed to be known about the power of the Word, then Boethius had only to gloss the Philosopher and the divine mystery of the Word was transformed into a human parody of categories and syllogism . . . . Before, we used to look to heaven, deigning only a frowning glance at the mire of matter; now we look at the earth, and we believe in the heavens because of earthly testimony.[15]

In sum, the library of the Middle Ages grew from the preserving vault of the monastary to service to scholarship. In the centuries that passed, Western civilization was built, and under the orthodoxy of the dominant institutions, knowledge and scholarship grew. The library served that growth, which was essentially an inquiry into the intellectual foundations and explanations of Catholic dogma. When societal conditions were ripe, intellectual curiosity advanced and in subjecting the faith of the times to reason, grew a fundamental threat to the common ideology. The library then resurrected a third role dating back to the founding of monastaries and libraries.[16] They sought to define the limits of legitimate knowledge and hence control the threat to theological and social orthodoxy.

Like the libraries of the Middle Ages, the modern academic library can not be understood separately from its institutional and social context. Generally, there has been a relatively recent shift from the ideal of a liberal education to specialized scholarship and useful knowledge.[17] Beyond this the society has demanded that "the university must serve it and save it" with its resources and research skills.[18] Because of these wide institutional and societal demands the libraries which serve the schools have developed comprehensive collections to provide the resources for a wide range of activities.[19] Size and range, because of those demands, contrast most starkly with the medieval library.

Turning next to the notion of preservation, the modern academic library continues the medieval role more than any other in the modern age. "Because the library must meet the conception of a university that has grown up in modern times, . . (it) has had put upon it, and has been significantly able to accept, the position of the primary preserver . . . of man's accumulated knowledge and ideas."[20] The importance of this does not need to be stressed. Suffice it to say that the modern age must now

[illegible] books in order to preserve the ideas and content for society to the future. Also because of the volume of the storage now, access must also be provided in terms of indexing and cataloging or the sheer size of collections will render them useless. So, unlike the Middle Ages, access is now a key to preservation.

Like the medieval period also, the academic library serves an educated clientele and the pursuit of scholarship. It has been these roles that the library has expanded most. First and foremost is the fact that the university/college has as its mission the education of students, and so "the college library cannot and does not exist apart from the work of teaching."[21] Beyond this is the support for research. Unlike the Middle Ages, the library does not seek to define or limit scholarship of students or researchers of any kind. A consciousness of the curatorial function, knowing that "the library is for society what memory is for the individual,"[22] coupled with the idea of academic freedom spell quite a different role for the library. Not only are collections built to support practical research, but also they house books which are kept regardless of current political, social, and intellectual trends. As such, they are repositories of ideas that may (quite purposefully) change the future. The library is now central to upholding freedom of inquiry, and this means supporting those same efforts in the publishing industry, other libraries, other librarians, and the technical efforts to provide access. In sum, the expanded role supporting research and the curriculum has a social and political dimension in terms of First Amendment rights. This differs from the Middle Ages.

The academic library not only backs up the education provided by the school, its existence is a potential education that must be acknowledged. "The library is a means of education, an instrumentality be which . . . (people) can take advantage of experiences not directly their own . . . ."[23] Because of this, the library serves as an alternative to the trend of academic specialization for the student, and as a guide back to traditional broad general education as a good member of society.[24]

Archibald MacLeish has posited a final role for the library germane to this discussion. Contrary to the twentieth century trend toward existentialism, nihilism, nuclear destruction, and in sum "meaninglessness",

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the library stands as a rebuttal. The preservation, organization, collection, and the functioning of the library itself is an affirmation of meaning and mystery which man still seeks to understand. This is done through physically organizing collected knowledge (in order to pursue that understanding) in the library.[25] Its physical existence is proof that man has not given up hope, and that reason and thought are valued assets in the race not to destroy the species. Perhaps this is the most striking similarity with the Middle Ages. In the now symbolic quest for survival and preservation, the library has come full circle.

The academic library thus serves an institution which in various ways still seeks knowledge. This now takes the form of a wide range of purposes and roles: educative, supporting research and teaching, and preserving the past. Differences with the past socially have now freed inquiry and the library collection from overt ideological constraints. The library is now a central resource in keeping ideals, alternatives, and history alive. It is also central as a social resource for problem solving. Finally, its existence serves as a symbol of the struggle to continue to solve crucial problems.

Perhaps it is the explosion in printed materials and the new roles of the library that have been at the heart of the problem in library philosophy. The profession has been so busy collectiong, housing, coordinating, and organizing all this, and fulfilling societal and academic demands that there has been little time to truly reflect on what it is all for. The combination of fiscal retrenchment and technological change now makes this reflection very necessary. It is at this point that the attempt will be to look further at the two examples of libraries to discern some basic foundations and recommendations for a library philosophy.

The "service" concept has been a staple of the profession's approach to a philosophy, but that alone is not enough. There is one concept that can and should overarch all considerations: freedom of inquiry. The twentieth century move toward this concept is nothing but good, and the library should embrace it in all its technical and intellectual aspects in the public, school, and academic library. The future ability of society to creatively solve its problems may depend on this.

Another aspect of the library which may have been overlooked because

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of its obviousness is the book. It is the book form which essentially is the historical foundation of the library, and it was the foundation of literacy. Literacy itself is a prerequisite to freedom of inquiry. If technology advances and subsumes the book what will be the function and foundation of libraries? The possible effects of transmitting knowledge through other mediums is not to be taken lightly.[26] Literacy and libraries play a role in a democracy, and further, it is not far to imagine the Orwellian possibility of harnessing the bibliographic and exhaustive circulation records for purposes other than the library intended. Ultimately there may be an inherent tension in endorsing or sponsoring technologies which might lead the library into situations and roles not to the benefit of the public it serves. Perhaps progress may lie in conservatively approaching the applications of the computer and micro storage of documents. The book after all may be the best alternative.

Finally, the service concept should be transcended and the library should play a role in deciding some of its institutional goals. Academia is replete with examples of the problems of programs started without consulting the library.[27] There is no reason that librarians should not add their perspective to the running of schools, universities, and city budgets. This may mean, for the academic library, the equal status of library administrators with other university leaders. Perhaps this would ultimately lead full circle to the ideal of service by playing a more active role in the environment. This in turn would play the critical role of establishing the library firmly in the public's mind.

The work of library philosophy is back to the fundamentals. Central to the view presented here is that one can not ignore one thousand years of continuity with the book. Conservative use of technology, committment to free inquiry and literacy may provide the rudiments of a unified approach for all libraries to then pursue their separate logistical and philosophical problems. To end, Eli Oboler has best stated what the library must serve, and by inference, why library philosophy is important:

> Most of the discussion of the . . . library's future in current library literature seems to center around two features, management devices and communication devices. I think neither is as important as what I referred to . . . as the "spirit" of academia. The spirit of true education-of the unfettered communication of information and informed opinion-must in the long run reign.[28]

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Footnotes

[1]J. Periam Danton, "Plea for a Philosophy of Librarianship," in American Library Philosophy: An Anthology, ed. Barbara McCrimmon (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1975), pp. 64,66.

[2]Elmer D. Johnson and Michael H. Harris, History of Libraries in the Western World, 3rd ed. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1976), p. 96.

[3]Sidney L. Jackson, Libraries and Librarianship in the West: A Brief History (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p.37.

[4]Ibid., p. 102.

[5]Johnson and Harris, pp. 96, 104.

[6]Ibid., p. 96.

[7]James Thompson, A History of the Principles of Librarianship (London: Clive Bugley and Linnet Books, 1977), p. 39.

[8]Morris Bishop, The Middle Ages (New York: American Heritage Press, 1970), pp. 5-6.

[9]Ibid., p. 284.

[10]Ibid., p. 276.

[11]Norman Zacour, An Introduction to Medieval Institutions, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), pp. 208-09.

[12]Johnson and Harris, p. 122.

[13]Jackson, p. 86.

[14]Zacour, p. 198.

[15]Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 473.

[16]Zacour, p. 197.

[17]Charles E. Bidwell, "Librarian, Administrator, and Professor: Implications of Changing College Social Structures," in Reader in the Academic Library, ed. Michael M. Reynolds (Washington D.C.: NCR Microcard Editions, 1970), p. 73.

[18]Frederick S. Troy, "The Library, the University and a Humane Society," Massachusetts Review 16 (Summer 1975) : 512.

[19]Bidwell, p. 75.

[20]James D. Hart, "Of Infinite Remembrance," Library Journal 89 (March 15, 1964) : 1130.

[21]William Warner Bishop, "The Library in the American College," in Reader in the Academic Library, ed. Michael M. Reynolds (Washington D.C.: NCR Microcard Editions, 1970), p. 67.

[22]Abraham Kaplan, "The Age of Symbol - A Philosophy of Library Education," in The Intellectual Foundations of Library Education ed. Don R. Swanson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 9.

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Footnotes Cont.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Hart, pp. 1100,1103.

[25]Archibald MacLeish, "The Premise of Meaning," in American Library Philosophy: An Anthology, ed. Bargara McCrimmon (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1975), pp. 229-35.

[26]Neil Postman, Teaching as a Conserving Activity (New York: Delacorte, 1979).

[27]Eli M. Oboler, Ideas and the University Library: Essays of an Unorthodox Academic Librarian (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 157.

[28]Oboler, p. 161.

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